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XXIV.—THE ORGANIC UNITY OF *TWELFTH NIGHT*

There is no agreement among Shakespearian critics with regard to the organic unity of *Twelfth Night*. Dr. Furnivall in one place believes that "the leading note of the play is fun."¹ In another place he says less aptly that "the lesson is, sweet are the uses of adversity."² Morton Luce records his "impression that the perfect unity of *Twelfth Night* lies in the wise good humor that pervades the play."³ Schlegel is representative of a group of critics who believe that "love regarded as an affair of the imagination rather than of the heart, is the fundamental theme running through all the variations of the play."⁴ Most commentators, however, have agreed that the leading thought of this play may be discovered in its title; that the words *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*, are themselves the key-note of the play; that Shakespeare's first thought was to provide a comedy suitable for the festival. No one of these critics has thought that an organic idea has been more than incidental in this creation of pure mirth. So purely comic are its scenes, and so entirely sufficient are all of its incidents, that critics have not gone behind its gay life to look for an underlying moral law.

But such a moral law does exist as the fundamental idea of the play. *Twelfth Night* is a philosophical defence of a moderate indulgence in pleasure, in opposition on the one hand to an extreme hostility to pleasure and on

¹ *Twelfth Night*. Ed. by Morton Luce. P. xxxiv (foot-notes).

² *Ibid.*

³ *Twelfth Night*. Ed. by Morton Luce, p. xxix.

⁴ Brandes, *Shakespeare*, vol. 1, p. 273.

the other hand to an extreme self-indulgence. Of the two extremes, the course of life that would banish all indulgence is emphasized as the more objectionable. In contrast to both, wise moderation is held up as the course to follow.

In opposing the extreme of excessive austerity Shakespeare is taking up cudgels for the stage in its struggle against the puritans; for the dramatists and the puritans fell out about the question of pleasure and pastime. The puritans in Shakespeare's day were permitting less and less of pleasure in their own lives, and in the lives of those about them. In this endeavor they were turning away from "stage-plays" as one of the chief purveyors to the people's pleasure. So little recreation, indeed, did they allow in their own life of discipline that their enemies accused them of banishing all recreation.

Stephen Gosson in his *Apology of the School of Abuse*,⁵ contended that the puritans did not banish recreation. However, recreation meant one thing to the dramatists and another and entirely different thing to the puritans. Puritans allowed as recreation, "food, sleep, change of labour, music, conference with holy men, reading Fox, the Bible, and doing problems."⁶ To the puritans it was strictly re-creation, "signifying to refresh either the body or the mind . . . when wearied, or spent in the employment of men's lawful callings, to the end that men recreated and refreshed, may cheerfully return to their lawful callings again, and therein serve God faithfully."⁷ To the man of the renaissance, with his love of imaginative

⁵ *An Apologie of the Schools of Abuse*: Arber Reprint edition, p. 72.

⁶ *A Short Treatise against Stage Playes* (1625), p. 241. In *English Drama and Stage* (Rox. Lib. 1869).

⁷ *A Short Treatise against Stage Playes* (1625), pp. 240, 241.

freedom and of pagan latitude, this definition of a recreation leading to asceticism was entirely repellent.

The puritan's aversion to pleasure did not cease with his withdrawing of himself from pastimes and plays. He strove to make it impossible for others to enjoy what he thought a sin. It was not enough that, being virtuous, he did not care for cakes and ale, and ginger hot in the mouth; he was determined that others enjoying these things of the flesh should join him in giving them up, if not of their own free will, then by force of legislation or of arms. As a result the puritans stood out prominently and disagreeably in the mind of the average man of the street in Shakespeare's day, for their hostile attitude towards pleasure, and their zeal in trying to force their opinion upon others.

To the dramatist the name of puritan was, therefore, anathema; and he savagely attacked him in his most effective way. On every stage he held him up to scorn as a man who merely affected holiness. This he gave out to be the real puritan. In these attacks he presented the puritan condemning all pastimes, not that the puritan might grow strong by righteous living, but that he might enjoy the good opinion of others for a piety which in reality he did not possess. In short the dramatist made the puritan out to be a religious hypocrite: to the world a strict observer of religious forms, but at heart a self-seeker.

William Prynne in 1633, reviewing the dramatist's hostility to his fellow puritans, said rightly that in their plays puritans were represented as either "hypocrites, fools, or furious mad-ones." Such indeed might be a general description of the puritans that Jonson, Marston, and Chapman give us in their plays. Zeal-of-the-Land Busy in *Bartholomew Fair* and Deacon Ananias in *The*

Alchemist well correspond to Prynne's description of the dramatist's attack upon the puritan.

The puritan as he appears in the plays of the Elizabethan dramatists meets no mercy. He is created for the purpose of derision. After he has been given an opportunity to display his churlish parts in denouncing vices, he is quickly revealed the hypocrite in word and deed, while the degree of his back-sliding is proportioned to his earlier pretence of virtue. As a result his disgrace at the end of the play is as satisfying to his enemies as it is humiliating to himself.

Shakespeare's method of attacking the puritans, however, is far less obvious than that of his fellow dramatists. By some he has even been thought to pass over with indifference the dispute of the theatre with the puritans. His infrequent mention of puritans lends appearance to this view, as does the fact that in his dramas we find only infrequent, and then only obscured, satire of puritan costume, speech, and manner. However, he does take part in the dispute, but in his distinctive way. *Measure for Measure* is characteristic of Shakespeare's method of attacking the enemy of the stage. In it he elevates his criticism of the religious reformers of the day from the level of personal satire and abuse to a higher plane of philosophical discussion. Angelo in this play is a scathing denunciation of a hypocrite who in his abuse of power falls from heights of severe virtue to gross sin.

In *Twelfth Night* certain factors have obscured the organic unity that is behind the spontaneous and satisfying mirth of the play. The fact that Shakespeare's art is romantic and not realistic, has hidden the underlying purpose of the play behind its story of love at cross purposes. Another fact that contributes to make our understanding of the play less complete is our re-

moval from the thought of the day for which the play was written. There is no doubt that in this as in Shakespeare's other plays there is a large body of ideas, facts, and sentiments which the author could presuppose on the part of his audience, but which we have to reconstruct with the assistance of notes and comments, so far as we are able to reconstruct them at all. The theme of *Twelfth Night*, closely related as I believe that it is to the actual thought of the day, required less explanation at that time than it requires now. Malvolio's dress, his starched gait, his close cut hair, his nasal intonation of voice, told the Elizabethan audience what has frequently been doubted by critics since that time, that Malvolio was none other than a puritan.

The organic idea quickening and giving life to *Twelfth Night* was born of the strife of Shakespeare's day. Written at a time when the renaissance and the reformation had come in England to the parting of the ways, *Twelfth Night* bears testimony of the influence of these contending currents of freedom and of restraint. Society was at variance with itself; and in the excitement of political and religious strife, extremes of every kind were championed. The puritan party was rallying to the defense of an extreme virtue; and against them were arrayed all the elements of society that held either other ideals or no ideals at all. It was no time for dispassionate judgment to assert itself. A judicious Hooker was at this time as rare as he was influential. Well-balanced natures that could at the same time feel deeply and judge rightly were conspicuously infrequent.

There was in the controversial puritan writing of the time as in the writing of their opponents, especially at the beginning of the dispute, the attempt to insist upon moderation in everything in life. In and out of the drama is

heard the plea for moderation, measure, a mean in all things; it is pointed out repeatedly that nature tolerates nothing in extreme degree. At first both puritans and their enemies allowed the use, but disallowed the abuse. The middle ground of things that were "indifferent," however, grew smaller to the puritans as the years advanced; and forms and ceremonies, recreations and diversions, that at one time were allowed, were gradually added to the list of forbidden things. The moderate middle ground upon which the man of the renaissance could meet and enjoy the reformed protestant became finally too small to stand upon; and the sweet uses of philosophy and of reasonableness gave way to party strife and prejudice.

The well balanced life, although an ideal that in theory hovered before the eyes of both dramatists and puritans, gave way in the heat of persecution and of hatred to passion; and as a result the followers of the reformation found an ever-increasing gulf forming between themselves and the men of the new learning. "Tell many of these men of the Scripture," says an ardent follower of the reformation, in speaking of the true sons of the renaissance, "they will scoff and turn it into a jest. Rebuke them for breaking the Sabbath day, they will say, you are a man of the Sabbath, you are very precise, you will allow us nothing, you will have nothing but the word of God; you will permit us no recreation, but have men like asses, who never rest but when they are eating."⁸

The correction of the abuse alone did not satisfy the cry for reform, but because this or that practice was not found mentioned in Holy Scripture, it should, therefore, the reformer maintained, be taken away. The determination of the puritans to follow every action of Christ's

⁸ *A Short Treatise against Stage Playes* (1625), pp. 240, 241.

(and no other's) as nearly as they were able ("omnis Christi actio nostra est instructio"),⁹ left no common standing ground upon which the pleasure seeker of the theatre and the sterner abstainer from pleasure could meet. The lack of balance, of moderation, on the part of the reformers, caused the friends of the arts to plead in vain that because of the abuse, the use should not be denied. "But what!" Sir Philip Sidney exclaims in defending poetry against its defamers, "Shall the abuse of a thing, make the right use odious?"¹⁰

Shakespeare, one of the sanest men that ever lived, viewed the struggles about him with a calmness that refused to allow him to become a partisan on either side. When the reformers were sweeping aside all pastime, and their opponents in reaction were sinking to new follies in their opposition, Shakespeare composed *Twelfth Night* in praise of the much-needed, well-balanced nature, to extoll that happy union of judgment and of feeling which is the basis of a higher sanity. He does this so deftly, with so little intrusion of his purpose in other than the most perfect dramatic form, that we of another time, removed from the strife of the puritan age, enjoy the result without realizing the purpose behind the finished production. Only the figure of Malvolio stands out in his hostility to all forms of amusement, to remind us that he is Shakespeare's contribution to the portraits of those enemies of art and of life in its fullest development, which aroused the Elizabethan dramatists to energetic and continued opposition.

The problem of life as Shakespeare saw it, and reveals it to us in this play, is basic; far greater than that of any group or sect of persons. It is the conflict in human nature between the reason and the emotions; and he sug-

⁹ Stubbes, *Anatomic of Abuses*, p. 111.

¹⁰ *Defense of Poesy*. Ed. by A. S. Cook (1890), p. 36.

gests to us in the perfect sanity of Viola and of Feste that the solution lies not in the exclusion of the one or the other, but in the union of the two. In two groups of characters in the play he presents to us the evil results of following, to the exclusion of the other, either reason or emotion. In the self-conceited Malvolio and the strict Olivia he gives us representatives of those reformers of his day who, ignoring the moderate, gravitate to an extreme course of life in which reason is exalted to the exclusion of the emotions. Similarly, in Sir Andrew and Sir Toby, the other extreme from a well-ordered life is represented, one in which pleasure and folly make up the whole existence of man.

Edmund Spenser, in the second canto of the second book of the *Fairie Queene*, which is devoted to the virtue of temperance, gives us in allegorical narrative form what Shakespeare is giving us in *Twelfth Night* in dramatic form. There we are shown "the face of golden Mean," whom "her sisters, two extremities, strive to banish clean." These three sisters correspond to the three divisions that may be made of the important characters of *Twelfth Night*. Of the three sisters, Medina, or Golden Mean, is opposed on the one hand to Elissa, melancholy and unfriendly to good cheer; and on the other hand to the young Perissa, "full of disport still laughing, loosely light."

Betwixt them both the fair Medina sate,
With sober grace and goodly carriage;
With equal measure she did moderate
The strong extremities of their outrage.
The forward pair she ever would assuage
When they would strive due reason to exceed.

Malvolio and Olivia in *Twelfth Night* may be said to correspond to Elissa who "with bent lowering brows, as she would threat, she scould and frownd with froward

countenance." Similarly Andrew Aguecheek and Orsino correspond to Perissa, the other sister, in whom is embodied the opposite extreme:

No measure in her mood, no rule of right,
But poured out in pleasure and delight;
In wine and meats she flowed above the bank,
And in excess exceeded her own might.

In Feste and Viola, we have the golden mean of the play. The description of Medina by Spenser might well describe Viola:

Ne in her speech, ne in her havior,
Was lightness seen or looser vanity,
But gracious womanhood and gravity,
Above the reason of her youthly years.

There is general agreement among critics with regard to the excellence and the sanity of the characters of Viola and Feste. To them Shakespeare has given self-control and a penetration that guide them in their course of life, without exposing them to the extreme either of folly or of austerity. They represent the golden mean of temperance, in whom reason and emotion are at poise.

The affection that Shakespeare has for Viola, who with Feste shares the distinction of standing between the "lighter people" and "the prudent ones," is clear. It is she to whom Shakespeare gives his own thoughts when she defends Feste's fooling, condemned by both Malvolio and Olivia:

This fellow is wise enough to play the fool,
And to do that well, craves a kind of wit;
He must observe their mood upon whom he jests,
The quality of person and the time:

.
This is a practice
As full of labour as a wise man's art:

In another place Viola shows a sense of proportion in rating sins, that we neither expect nor find in Malvolio or Olivia.

I hate ingratitude more in a man
Than lying, vainness, babling, drunkenness,
Or any taint of vice, whose strong corruption
Inhabits our frail blood.

III, 4.

But this ability to see and to think clearly, and to control her affections when necessary, was Viola's part in Shakespeare's plan of the play. As a further result of her well-balanced character, the plan of the play rewards her with the husband of her choice, while Orsino and Olivia are defeated in the aims of their affections. Similarly Feste in the sub-plot does not meet disappointment as do Andrew and Malvolio, but remains the happy son of mirth, to whom Shakespeare has given in goodly measure his own penetration into the motives of others.

In the persons of Orsino and Sir Andrew we have characters that are accepted as examples, in different degrees, of ungoverned natures. Orsino has surrendered himself entirely to his passion for Olivia, that will "bide no deny." No check of reason holds him back from his extravagance of love; and when count is taken at the end, his suit for the hand of Olivia is no more successful than that of the witless Sir Andrew, who has wasted his time in "fencing, dancing, and bear-baiting." So far as they are shown to us they have acted without reference to the guidance of reason; and are the products of their surrender to their unchecked inclinations.

With Sir Andrew may be included Sir Toby, Maria, and Fabian, as representatives of the extreme of mirth and frivolity. Andrew is in the fore-rank of these "lighter people." He is closely followed, however, by Sir Toby,

who will not hear of a song of "good-life," but clamors for a "love-song," which has as its theme the present enjoyment of life—

For in delay there lies no plenty,
Present mirth has present laughter,
What's to come is still unsure.

II, 3.

On the same occasion it is Sir Andrew who gives utterance to his belief that life consists not of the four elements, but rather of eating and drinking; and for this sentiment he is proclaimed by Sir Toby, to the accompaniment of a call for wine, no less than a scholar.

The character of Olivia is open to no misunderstanding. She is the most impulsive of the whole impulsive group; nor do we feel the smallest surprise when her exaggerated grief gives sudden place to exaggerated passion. With regard to grouping her with Malvolio, however, it is important to dwell upon her determination to spend seven years in mourning. Her actions and words ally her with "her sad and civil steward," who suits so well with her fortunes. Her nature and his agree in looking upon life with severity. Her austere attitude is natural to her, so that it is not solely because of the recent death of her brother that she hath abjured the company and the sight of men. Until her distracting frenzy for Cesario seizes upon her, she not only rules pleasure out of her own life but regulates the life of her household with severity. The reproofs that she administers to Feste and to Cesario, upon her first visit, reveal her a stern governess of her household. "She has no folly," as the Clown says of her. Her whole endeavor is concentrated upon a rule of reform that will either separate Sir Toby and the other members of her household from their disorders, or else dismiss them from her house.

It is to this model of virtue that comes the distracting

frenzy of falling in love with Viola disguised as a messenger from Orsino. Her self-discipline does not save her from the folly of loving Viola madly in spite of her resolution not to admit the suit of man. She is conscious of her revolt from her standard of reason and refers to it several times:

There is something in me that reproves my fault
But such a headstrong potent fault it is,
That it but mocks reproof.

III, 4.

I love thee so, that maugre all thy pride,
Nor wit nor reason can my passion hide.

III, 1.

Olivia is only one of a number of examples that Shakespeare gives us in his plays, to show the futility of the aims of those who would be wiser than nature; and seek, in ruling out of life the emotions, to exalt the single standard of reason to supreme importance.

Malvolio shares with Olivia the distinction of representing the extreme of austerity, and is similarly brought to see his error. The placing of Olivia and Malvolio in the centre of the plot interest, points to Shakespeare's intention in this play of emphasizing the inability of the puritans to rule out of life pleasure and pastime.

Those critics who have found Malvolio's punishment ¹¹ both coarse and excessive have failed to conceive Malvolio as the hypocrite that Shakespeare intended him to be. This was the Elizabethan dramatist's usual denunciation of the puritans who ordered their life after Malvolio's

¹¹ T. Kenny (1864). Furness, *Twelfth Night*, p. 382: "There is nothing in his conduct to justify the unscrupulous persecution of his tormentors."

Wm. Archer, in Furness, *Twelfth Night*, p. 399: "Punishment excessive to the point of barbarity."

principles. It is Maria, Olivia's handmaid, who reveals him to us. She knows from frequent observation both what he is and what he is not. He is not as he seems, a genuinely pious man. It is only sometimes that he is a kind of a puritan. His puritanism is a pose that he adopts to advance himself at this time when with his mistress puritanical mannerisms are in favor. He affects it all. The show of wisdom and of gravity that he puts on, he learns from books. He is not what he appears, a grave and sedate man of virtue, acting from the conviction of his inner spirit, zealous in the truth, and therefore not suffering any vice to go unreprehended in Olivia's house. At heart he is very different, as Maria tells us, from that which he appears to be. He is not humble in spirit; but proud and arrogant to those below him. He is the best persuaded of himself, so crammed, as he thinks, with excellences, that it is his ground of faith that all who look upon him love him.

A complete antithesis exists between his ground of faith and that of the true Christian of the day, who, wishing to make more sincere his expression of love to God and man, had given to him, in derision at first, the name of puritan. Maria's exposition of Malvolio's ground of faith as self-love marks him off in spirit from the part he acts, and classes him as a hypocrite.

The inconsistencies in Malvolio's character that Mr. Archer and other critics¹² have noted and have attributed to Shakespeare's incomplete mastery in the delineation of Olivia's steward, are not defects, but the natural inconsistencies that would arise in such a conflict between the real Malvolio and the part that he is acting.

It is probable that to the audience of his day, Malvolio

¹² Furness, *Twelfth Night*, pp. 399, 400.

appeared as a designing steward, who hoped to win his lady's favor by playing the puritan in her household. Feste had a shrewd suspicion of his motive when he wished him a "speedy infirmity for the better increasing his folly." Maria also saw through him. She based her plot of the letter on this weakness. Finally we hear Malvolio confessing in secret that his thoughts are upon the days when he shall be Count Malvolio by reason of marriage to his lady. If we keep this motive of his in mind, and measure his desire to please Olivia accordingly, there will arise no doubt in our mind as to whether his punishment is excessive.

In the presence of Olivia and of others he may feign a humbleness, but there is no genuine humility in Malvolio's make-up. When alone, in thinking of the favor his mistress shows him, "contemplation makes a rare turkey-cock of him" and "he jets under his advanced plumes." And later he shows his inner self by believing the passages of impossible grossness in the letter with their appeal to his enormous self-conceit. Besides being encouraged in the letter to make love to Olivia, he is urged to cast his humble slough, and appear fresh, to be opposite with a kinsman, surly with servants. He is commanded to let his tongue tang with arguments of state and to put himself into the trick of singularity.

No order could be more welcome to Malvolio, whose thoughts are constantly on "state" and on the acquiring of power. "This is open," he exclaims with delight upon receiving the command, "I will be proud, I will read politick authors, I will baffle Sir Toby, I will wash off gross acquaintance, I will be point devise the very man. I will be strange, stout, in yellow stockings and cross-gartered, even with the swiftness of putting on." And he is

"strange" and "stout" when he comes to Olivia in yellow stockings. With ridiculous boldness in his lady's presence, he answers Maria with, "Shall nightingales answer daws?" And later, when given over to the care of Sir Toby, he is both surly with servants and opposite with a kinsman. Here it is that he revels according to his nature in disdain and arrogance, "Go hang yourselves all, you are idle, shallow things; I am not of your element; you shall know more hereafter."

If further proof were needed to mark off Malvolio and Olivia as of "the prudent ones," a formidable list of qualities and practices objectionable to them might be compiled, in which together they shared their disapproval with other puritans. In such a list would be included health-drinking, drunkenness, quarrelling, bear-baiting, fencing, bad manners, dancing, evil company, mis-spending time, poetry, plays, idle compliment, untruths, idleness, jesting, pranks, boldness, oaths, lack of regard for proper place and proper time, singing, disorderly conduct, staying out late at night, feasting, music, discourtesy, disrespect of persons, folly, fashionable dress, shallowness. The sure hand of the master dramatist has touched Malvolio's and Olivia's dislike of these habits lightly, but sufficiently to score his points with an audience alive to the significance of each touch. In forming our opinion of Olivia and of Malvolio with regard to this list, it is well to keep in mind that in an age of greater license than our own, some of the habits objected to by Malvolio, such as excessive drinking, bear-baiting and oaths, which are offensive to us, were not objectionable to most people.

At the end of *Twelfth Night* is a song sung by Feste that is thought by some to be full of wisdom and by others to be hardly intelligible. The refrain to each couplet omitted, the words of the song are as follows:

When that I was and a little tiny boy,
A foolish thing was but a toy.

But when I came to man's estate,
Gainst Knaves and Thieves men shut their gate.

But when I came alas to wive,
By swaggering could I never thrive.

But when I came unto my beds,
With tosspots still had drunken heads.

A great while ago the world begun,
But that's all one, our play is done,
And we'll strive to please you every day.

In these words we have Feste touching lightly upon the fundamental idea of the play. Experience, coming to him with man's estate, has taught him the difference between men who are knaves and men who are not. The third and fourth stanzas of his song give his division of knaves into two classes, representatives of each of which he finds in his fellows of the sub-plot. Malvolio, who by swaggering tries to thrive in his suit for Olivia's hand, is his reference to the one class; and Sir Toby, Olivia's drunken cousin, and his foolish dupe Sir Andrew Aguecheek, whom canary has put down, are the point of his allusion to the tosspots, who go to bed with drunken heads. This division of knaves by Feste is his reference to the followers of the two extremes in the play. Experience has taught him that against both "men shut their gates."

"A great while ago the world begun," he adds. This matter of good and evil is as old as the world, is his thought. You have seen the folly of the fools, and the disappointments that they have reaped from their folly. "But that's all one, the play is done, we will strive to please you every day."

Thus it is that Feste, the wise discerner of motives

throughout the play, gives us in this his song, and the last words of the comedy, assistance in penetrating to its fundamental idea; and in so doing adds his word to the support of the theory that Shakespeare in *Twelfth Night* scorns the folly of extremes, and holds up to high praise the mean that we term golden.

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